

Book Review

Paniel REYES CÁRDENAS¹

Review of Lossky, Vladimir. *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2024. 499pp.

The appearance of Vladimir Lossky's *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God* in its 2024 English translation provides a significant occasion for philosophical reflection as of 2026. Originally composed in the 1950s, this posthumous work treats Meister Eckhart not as a 'mystical outlier'² but as a rigorous participant in medieval metaphysics alongside figures such as Aquinas, Maimonides, and Avicenna.³ Fr. Michael Demkovich, OP, pointed out to me the high cost of the publication process and edition, all of it well worthwhile for the Eckhart Society. The relevance of the publication of this English version of Vladimir Lossky's book today will be explained below.

The central tension of Lossky's study is the search for the *nomen innominabile*—the unnameable name.⁴ Lossky identifies a distinct shift in Eckhart's thought: while Pseudo-Dionysius found God's ineffability in His being 'beyond' existence, Eckhart locates the unknowability of God precisely in *Esse* (Being) itself.⁵ For Eckhart, God is unknowable because His nature is the *Esse absconditum*—a hidden Being that is not an object of the mind but its ultimate

¹ Oblate School of Theology / The University of Sheffield, USA/UK. Email: pansbert@gmail.com, preyes@ost.edu

² Vladimir Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2024), Foreword by Rowan Williams, xiv.

³ Ibid., 13-7.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

depth.⁶

Lossky notes that for Eckhart, 'God *sub ratione esse* and *essence* is as though sleeping and latent, hidden in himself.'⁷ This 'hidden being' is not merely an external metaphysical principle but is found in the 'most intimate depths' of the human soul.⁸ Lossky observes that 'the God of *Esse* remains ineffable, then, yet this *Esse absconditum* is not external to the one who seeks Him.'⁹

In contemporary scholarship, the relevance of Lossky's work often centres on his analysis of Eckhart's 'non-dualism'¹⁰ Lossky argues that Eckhart avoids simple pantheism through a distinctive 'analogy of attribution.'¹¹ In this view, there are three unique achievements of Lossky's study that positively show Meister Eckhart at the apex of the intellectual medieval scholastic discussion:

- Finite Indigence: Creatures possess no qualities (being, goodness, wisdom) intrinsically; they are 'finite analogues' perpetually hungry for a fullness they receive only as an immediate divine communication.¹²
- Divine Plenitude: As Lossky observes, 'every creature is full of God; it is a book.'¹³ In such book the spiritually un-attached man and woman may come to know he or she is a book of the divine.
- Continuous Influx: Created being is in a 'continuous flow and becoming',¹⁴ each being receives existence from God just as light in a medium is received from the sun.¹⁵

Thus, Vladimir Lossky's *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing*

⁶ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God*, 5.

⁷ Lossky cites Eckhart's *Expositio in Iohannem*: 'Deus sub ratione esse et essentiae est quasi dormiens et latens absconditus in se ipso.'

⁸ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation, xv.

¹¹ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 411.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 410.

¹⁴ Lossky cites Eckhart's *Expositio Libri Sapientiae* regarding the continuous reception of being.

¹⁵ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 185.

the Unknowable God (2024 translation) represents a formidable effort to relocate Meister Eckhart within the rigorous mainstream of medieval metaphysics, rather than treating him as an isolated ‘mystical’ outlier.¹⁶ By engaging with the Thuringian’s Latin and German works, Lossky exposes a dialectic that challenges the traditional boundaries between scholasticism and contemplative theology.¹⁷ In the following *précis*, we can appreciate how Lossky achieved a cataphatic presentation of the apophatic exploration of Meister Eckhart.

I. The Metaphysics of Ineffability: Esse as the Absolute Hiddenness

The foundational thesis of Lossky’s study is that Eckhartian apophaticism is uniquely grounded in *Esse* (Being) rather than in a state ‘beyond’ existence.¹⁸ While the Dionysian tradition often located divine ineffability in God’s ‘supra-essential’ nature—placing the Divine beyond the category of Being—Eckhart identifies unknowability within the very ‘purity’ of *Esse* itself.¹⁹

For Eckhart, God is the *nomen innominabile* (unnameable name) because His nature is the *Esse absconditum*: a hidden, indistinct Being that remains ‘sleeping and latent’ in itself.²⁰

This is not a mere linguistic failure but an ‘active asceticism of intellect.’²¹ Lossky argues that Eckhart transposes the Thomistic metaphysical principle of God’s intimacy to all things into a psychological and spiritual register: the search for God becomes an ‘enstasy’, an entry into the ‘ground’ (*grund*) where the depth of God and the soul are found to be identical.²² Consequently, the

¹⁶ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God*, Foreword by Rowan Williams, xiv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5, 13.

²¹ Étienne Gilson, Preface to the First Edition of Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, xxviii.

²² Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 6, 33. Lossky does not mention the connection of the “Grund” with the Eastern image of *Nous*, but my impression is that this is an ever-present point of dialogue of this work, more specifically in the reading of the Pseudo-Dionysius.

soul must strip away all 'modes' of being to encounter the God who is without mode.²³

II. Causality, Analogy, and the Infinite Sphere

A significant portion of the work is dedicated to Eckhart's theory of causality and his departure from the standard 'analogy of proportionality.'²⁴ Lossky demonstrates that Eckhart employs a distinctive 'analogy of attribution,'²⁵ which creates a sharp, almost paradoxical relationship between the Creator and the creature.²⁶

In this schema, creatures possess no qualities—such as being, goodness, or wisdom—intrinsically. They are 'finite analogues' perpetually 'hungry' for a fullness they receive only as an immediate, continuous divine influx.²⁷ Lossky uses the analogy of light in a medium: just as the air is only luminous so long as the sun shines through it, the creature only 'is' so long as God is present within it.²⁸ This leads to the radical Eckhartian claim that creatures, considered in themselves and apart from God, are 'pure nothingness.'²⁹

To illustrate this, Lossky explores the symbol of the 'infinite intellectual sphere' whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.³⁰ God is 'indistinct' from all things because He is their very existence, yet He remains 'distinct' by His absolute purity and transcendence.³¹

²³ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 45–8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 361.

²⁵ Even though the distinction between Analogies of proportionality and attribution comes from Cardinal Cajetan, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, *De Nominum Analogia* (1498), cap. II ("De analogia attributionis") and cap. III ("De analogia proportionalitatis"). For the standard critical text, see P. N. Zammit, ed., *De Nominum Analogia; De Conceptu Entis* (Rome: Angelicum, 1934). Lossky effectively argues that Meister Eckhart understood the distinction very clearly in his use of Aquinas.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 411.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 424.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76–80.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

III. The Procession of the Word and the Birth in the Soul

Lossky pauses at great length on the distinction between internal and external divine production.³² He argues that for Eckhart, the generation of the Son (the Word) within the Trinity and the creation of the world, both are often mirrored into a single act of the 'One'³³. This 'oneness' is the supreme name of God, acting as the common principle for both theogony (the inner life of God) and cosmogony (the creation of the universe).³⁴

This metaphysical structure provides the basis for the 'birth of the Word in the soul.'³⁵ Because the soul's ground is identical to God's ground, the same eternal generation that happens within the Trinity must happen within the detached soul.³⁶ Lossky shows that this is not a metaphorical birth but a metaphysical reality facilitated by 'grace', which he distinguishes as 'first grace' (creation/departure) and 'second grace' (return/reflux).³⁷

IV. The Noetic Return and Intellectual Nihilism

The final movement of the *précis* concerns the 'ascent of the intellect.'³⁸ Lossky aligns Eckhart with a noetic perspective, in such view the human intellection appears as essentially 'supernatural', containing the 'seminal reasons' of all things.³⁹ To achieve final union, the intellect must undergo a form of 'intellectual nihilism', detaching itself from all determined being ('this or that') to join the Pure Act of the *Ipsium Intelligere*.⁴⁰

On the relevance of Lossky's posthumous work

The relevance of this work in 2026 lies in its retrieval of a 'rigorous

³² Ibid., 60.

³³ Ibid., 64.

³⁴ Ibid., 61, 66.

³⁵ Ibid., 200-5.

³⁶ Ibid., 240.

³⁷ Ibid., 250-2.

³⁸ Ibid., 264.

³⁹ Ibid., 280.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 316-8.

Eckhart.⁴¹ In an era of fragmentation in which intellectual study and spiritual inquiry appear detached, Lossky provides a bridge of intellectual rigour, showing that for Eckhart, the highest form of prayer was not an emotional state, but a metaphysical 'breaking-through' to the Godhead.⁴² As Rowan Williams observes in his foreword, the work invites us back to a vision where thought and prayer are a single movement toward the 'bottomless ocean' of divine infinity.⁴³

Lossky presents an Eckhart whose theology is an 'active asceticism of intellect.'⁴⁴ In times where philosophy has turned on the focus on the limits of language, on the one hand, and the intersection of contemplative practice with intellectual rigour is required, on the other hand, this study is indispensable. The translation highlights Eckhart's distinction between the *quod est* (what something is) and the *quo est* (God's being), which Lossky sees as a profound handle on the continuity between the infinite and the finite.⁴⁵ For the British philosophical tradition—frequently wary of 'mysticism'—Lossky provides a bridge of rigorous scholarship.⁴⁶

Vladimir Lossky's achievement in this work, however, goes further to decisively contribute to the dialogue between the Western and the Eastern mystical tradition. Indeed, this is hinted in the sophisticated transposition of the Eastern Orthodox distinction between the divine essence and the divine energies into the Latin framework of Meister Eckhart. Lossky argues that Eckhart's struggle to articulate the relationship between the *Esse absconditum* (hidden Being) and the manifest activities of God is not a failure of scholastic logic, but an intuitive move towards the Palamite distinction.⁴⁷ By identifying the 'Ground' (*Grund*) as the incommunicable essence and the 'Birth of the Word' in the soul as

⁴¹ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation of Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, xv.

⁴² Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 346–8.

⁴³ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation, xvii.

⁴⁴ Étienne Gilson, Preface to the First Edition of Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, xxviii.

⁴⁵ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation, xvii.

⁴⁶ Étienne Gilson, Preface to the First Edition, xxix.

⁴⁷ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology: Knowing the Unknowable God* 13–5.

a participation in the divine operations, Lossky demonstrates that Eckhart's supposedly heterodox statements regarding the soul's identity with God are better understood through the lens of *Theosis*.⁴⁸ In this reading, the soul does not become God in essence, but participates truly in the divine life through the uncreated energies that flow from the hidden Godhead into the created order.⁴⁹

More broadly, Lossky facilitates a profound rapprochement between Eastern and Western theology by stripping away the polemical layers of the fourteenth-century controversies.⁵⁰ He positions Eckhart as a bridge-figure who, while operating within the Dominican tradition of the West, remains deeply rooted in the apophatic stream of Pseudo-Dionysius—a common heritage for both traditions.⁵¹ By rehabilitating Eckhart's reputation through an Eastern noetic lens, Lossky suggests that the divergence between East and West is not an insurmountable ontological chasm, but often a difference in the 'dialectic of mystery'⁵². The result is a work that does not merely study Eckhart as a historical curiosity, but retrieves him as a vital participant in a unified, ecumenical vision of the 'bottomless ocean' of divine infinity.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., 346-8.

⁴⁹ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation, xv–xvi.

⁵⁰ Lossky, *Eckhart's Apophatic Theology*, 418–21.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17-20.

⁵² Étienne Gilson, Preface to the First Edition, xxix.

⁵³ Rowan Williams, Foreword to the English Translation, xvii. Williams alludes to St John Damascene's dictum "*Pelagus infinita substantiae*".